Yuki ITANI-ADAMS

Australian National University

Reflecting on your own language: A case study of an advanced Japanese course at the Australian National University

Abstract

This reports on a student research project carried out in an advanced Japanese language course at the Australian National University in 2012. The aim of the project was for the students to present an academic analysis of a particular social or cultural issue confronting contemporary Japan. The task discussed in this study is one part of the staged preparation in the research project, where students were required to prepare and conduct interviews with a Japanese native speaker as a means of gathering data. The aim was to promote students' awareness of the gap between the target Japanese and their own current stage of Japanese. They transcribed their interaction with the native speaker interviewee, and then analysed the linguistic and socio-pragmatic features of their own Japanese language usage. The pedagogical framework for the project draws on the second language acquisition research of Swain's (1993) 'comprehensible output hypothesis' and Long's (1996) 'interaction hypothesis'. Swain and Long both argue that input alone is not enough, and that output, especially when it promotes the negotiation of meaning, is important to language acquisition. The student evaluation revealed that 85% of the students felt that the task helped their learning of Japanese, and 81% thought that critical analysis of their own linguistic errors helped their learning of Japanese.

1. Introduction

Ideally, the development of second language proficiency should include not only linguistic knowledge and skills but also pragmatic and socio-cultural knowledge. Second language learners need to be able to respond appropriately in native-speaker (NS) and non-native-speaker (NNS) contact situations. Classroom language teaching today, drawing on communicative language teaching methodology, is more than simply the teaching of vocabulary and grammar out of context. It also incorporates pragmatic and socio-cultural aspects of language use. However, it is difficult in a classroom setting to provide students with authentic situations that require them to use both their linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge in an unscripted interaction. A student research project was carried out in an advanced Japanese language course at the Australian National University (ANU) in 2012. The goal was for students to conduct a small group research project into a particular social or cultural issue confronting contemporary Japan, using Japanese language sources. The project

comprised a number of stages: forming a group, deciding on a group topic, gathering data, analysing data and presentation. One particular task was set during the data gathering stage and it aimed not only to provide students with authentic interactional opportunities with Japanese NS, but also to reflect on their own language use in their NS-NNS interaction in order to promote their awareness of the gap between the target Japanese and their own current stage of Japanese.

The main purpose of this study is to report and discuss this task. The study first reviews the theoretical frameworks in second language teaching and learning on which the task is based. Then it describes the project tasks in detail and finally, reports on the students' reflections on their own language use during this activity. The students were also required to evaluate the task as part of an investigation into the pedagogical value of such an activity as a language learning exercise. Based on an analysis of the work submitted by the students and their evaluations of the task within the context of pedagogical research, this study argues that the project task effectively delivered enhanced language learning outcomes and, by encouraging students to develop self-reflection skills, contributed to their development as autonomous learners.

2. What promotes language learning?

Second language learning research suggests that while input is crucial for the acquisition of the target language, language learning does not take place without 'output'. Swain's (1985, 1993, 2000) 'comprehensible output theory' argues that output is important to language learning. Swain's theory claims that it is only through producing language, either spoken or written that language learning can occur. In her study of a French-Canadian immersion program, Swain (1985) found that the students' acquisition of French was less than expected in spite of the increased input the students were receiving. Swain argued that the learners' lack of awareness of the importance of structuring their French correctly limited their productive capacity and thus their overall acquisition. Therefore, learners need opportunities that force them to produce language that is comprehensible to their interlocutors.

Further, Swain (1985) argued that by understanding the need to produce comprehensible output learners 'notice gaps' between their own current interlanguage and the target language and this forces them to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing. The importance of 'noticing' is also stressed by Schmidt (1990, 2010) in his 'noticing hypothesis'. Schmidt claims that learning can only occur when it is 'noticed', or that at the very least this is an important starting point. Another area in which output production can facilitate language learning is that through a focus on output—the learners can test their hypotheses based on their own interlanguage and reformulate these hypotheses if necessary.

Conversational interaction is also an essential condition for second language learning in the 'interactional hypothesis' (Long 1996), which finds that when meaning needs to be negotiated between the speaker and the interlocutor, this act creates

opportunities for learners to notice the gap, to produce comprehensible output and to receive corrective feedback.

In addition, language learning is more effective when learners are developmentally ready to process the target form, as suggested by Pienemann's 'teachability hypothesis' (Keßler, Liebner and Mansouri 2011; Pienemann 1998, 2005). Learners develop at different rates and each individual student is at a different stage of developmental readiness. This raises the importance of individualizing their learning experience in the classroom context.

From the literature reviewed above, it can be seen that for language educators a challenge is to create an environment and tasks where students can engage in meaningful interaction using the target language, notice the gaps between their own interlanguage and the target language, receive corrective feedback and fuel their progress in language learning in a way that matches their own developmental readiness.

Furthermore, such a task should not only target the linguistic features but also incorporate the socio-pragmatic features of the language to help learners to acquire skills to use the said language appropriately. One example of socio-pragmatic aspects in Japanese that is relevant in this study is the Japanese *aizuchi*, or backchanneling. Nobuko Mizutani (1999, 2008) and Osamu Mizutani (1990) discuss the characteristics of the Japanese *aizuchi* and its role in Japanese discourse. Both researchers propose that the nature of conversation among the Japanese native speakers is a *kyoowa* (collaborative dialogue) rather than a *taiwa* (dialogue). In *kyoowa*, the participants of a conversation continually signal to each other to demonstrate that they are participating in the discourse by using *aizuchi*. As a result, in some cases, their individual utterances collaboratively constitute one whole sentence.

Mizutani (1999) comments that the Japanese *aizuchi un*, *hai* or *ee*, which all translate literally as 'yes', are not the same as 'yes' used in English to indicate agreement. Rather they are used by the listener to reassure the speaker that they are still listening. Mizutani found that in Japanese, *aizuchi* was inserted every 20 syllables on average. Based on this finding, she concluded that the listener inserts the signal of 'I am listening' in mid-sentence without waiting for the speaker to finish his or her turn. This is what Miyata and Nisisawa (2007: 1255) call the "utterance internal type" of *aizuchi* and they also note that this type signals "only continuation and understanding ('I listen'), but never agreement or empathy".

Aizuchi includes such phrases as *soo desu ne* (literally, 'it is so, isn't it?') and even such speech acts as finishing off the sentence of another speaker (or taking their turn mid-sentence) can be considered *aizuchi*. In addition, *aizuchi* are not always expressed in words and sentences. Simple non-verbal cues such as nodding or sentence final particles such as *ne* and *yo* used with a sentence or used on their own are also categorised as *aizuchi* (Kita and Ide 2007).

The following example illustrates this collaborative act, especially in Turns 9 and 10, (Mizutani 1999: 58). Note that the original text was written in Japanese without the speaker codes and the English translation; these have been added by this author.

Participant B inserts *aizuchi* (marked in bold in turns 2, 4, 6, and 8) before participant A finishes his/her sentence. In Turn 10, participant B takes over participant A's unfinished turn in Turn 9 and then continues to complete the sentence.

(1) Example of *aizuchi* from Mizutani (1999: 58)

1 A: *konogoro wa nan demo kikai ni yaraseru yoo ni natte*
'nowadays everything is automatized and'

2 B: ***hai***
'yeah'

3 A: *wakai hito wa ii kedo, otoshiyori nanka*
'it's alright for the young people but for old people'

4 B: ***ee ee***
'yeah yeah'

5 A: *densha no kippu o kau no demo, yokin o hikidasu no demo magotsuitari*
'(they) get a bit confused when buying train tickets and getting money out (of the ATM) and'

6 B: ***soo soo***
'right right'

7 A: *kinodoku na yoo na kanji ga shimasu kedo*
'I feel sorry for them but'

8 B: ***ee***
'yeah'

9 A: *isoide iru toki nanka ushiro ni iru to iraira shite*
'when in hurry, if (you are) standing behind one, it gets a bit frustrating and'

10 B: *'che' tto shitauchi shitari suru hito mo imasu kara ne*
'some people overtly make the 'tut tut (*che*)' noise (clicking their tongue to show frustration), don't they?'

Without knowledge of how the Japanese *aizuchi* are used, that is, of the social and cultural context underpinning the language used, Japanese learners can fail to understand the interlocutor's intentions expressed through the *aizuchi*. For example, the listener's *hai, ee* may be taken as an indication of agreement when, in fact, they are not. Or the interlocutor coming in before the speaker has finished may be taken to be a signal to 'stop talking' (Mizutani 1999). Therefore, language educators need to provide opportunities for the learners to learn to recognise such socio-pragmatic mechanisms and understand their correct intentions before they can learn to use these mechanisms themselves.

3. ANU advanced Japanese language course student research project

The student research project (hereafter, the project) was carried out in one of the advanced Japanese language courses JPNS 3006 *Advanced Japanese: Language in*

Context at ANU during Semester 1 in 2012, made up of 13 teaching weeks with a two week mid-term break between Week 7 and Week 8.

The aim of the course was to encourage progress in all of the four communication skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—through the study of five thematic modules. Each module centered around a particular theme, namely: environmental issues; attitudes towards marriage among youth in current Japan; university students and employment; technology and mobile phones; and onomatopoeia and politeness in Japanese language. Each module was scheduled for approximately two to three weeks and included at least two audio-visual files and two readings that related to the theme. The audio-visual materials included news media, popular YouTube videos, sections from a drama or a movie or J-pop. For reading materials, students were exposed to original-language academic articles, newspaper materials and sections of novels that they might not otherwise encounter. While *aizuchi* was not introduced as a specific module, students were asked to pay attention to this aspect of all discourse studied and discuss how participants were cooperatively developing their *kyoowa* in any conversation items, such as TV interviews, used in the course throughout the semester.

The course comprised of three hours of classes per week and was convened and taught by the author. There were 48 students enrolled in this course. They brought a wide range of different experiences in their previous study of Japanese, ranging from three years of study at university (moving from beginner to intermediate to advanced courses), to having lived in Japan for more than a year, to coming from a Japanese heritage language background.

3.1 The project

The project accounted for 50% of the overall course assessment. In groups of three, students were required to conduct further research into one of the course module topics. Each group was required to form research question(s), gather data and information and present to the class at the end of the semester. In the process of gathering data and information, each student was required to individually interview a Japanese NS, read a minimum of one print media source and watch a minimum of one audio-visual media source (e.g. Japanese news). In addition, each student was required to write a short essay in Japanese (1500 characters in length, approximately 500 words) outlining their research project and its findings. The task discussed in this study is the interview with a Japanese NS, which was embedded in the data gathering stage of the project. The assessment of the project was divided into three staged components:

- Part A: Interview transcription and analysis (15%)
- Part B: Group presentation (20%)
- Part C: Individual research paper (15%)

In Part A, all students in the course were asked to transcribe 10 minutes of their interview with the Japanese NS interviewee and to then analyse the linguistic and

socio-pragmatic features of their own Japanese language usage. The software ExpressScribe was introduced to the class to make the transcription easier. A simple transcription convention was introduced, with an explanation that they write exactly what was recorded, including any mistakes they had made. Students were told that the linguistic errors they had made during the interview were not assessed, i.e. they would not be penalised if they had made mistakes during the interview. Rather they were assessed on the care taken to transcribe 10 minutes of an interview. Although the transcription length was 10 minutes, the transcription quantity differed from student to student with the number of turns[1] ranging from roughly 25 to 300, and the number of characters from roughly 1000 to 6000 (some 300 to 2000 words).

After the transcription was completed, students were given four questions to guide their reflection. The students were encouraged to reflect on how they employed *aizuchi* and politeness— a focus of much class discussion during the semester—but could also report on any other features of language they noticed. The report also included their analysis of successful as well as unsuccessful communication, i.e. communication breakdown. They reflected on what worked and what did not work so well and the strategies they or their interlocutor employed to promote or amend the communication. They were also encouraged to reflect on the consequences of the language used, particularly what happened if they did not manage to avoid miscommunication. Further, they were asked to identify where they had included non-target linguistic features in their own Japanese, to explain those errors and then correct them into more natural forms.

The rest of this study presents a number of student reflections on their language use, selected because of their particular focus on *aizuchi*. In this task, the focus was on verbal *aizuchi* and excluded any non-verbal cues such as nodding. A brief discussion follows the description of students' comments. The final section of this study presents the students' evaluation of this task in relation to their own language learning.

3.2 Students' own reflection of their language use

3.2.1 Use of *aizuchi*

With regard to *aizuchi,* an important socio-pragmatic feature in Japanese, the majority of the students agreed that they were able to use *aizuchi* often and appropriately to encourage their interviewee to continue talking. However, the type of *aizuchi* they managed to use drew their attention—many students commented that the *aizuchi* they used were mostly single words or a set phrase such as *hai* ('yes'), *un* ('um'), *eeto* ('well') and *soo desu ka* ('is that so?'). Other students made special notes if they had managed to go beyond that. Student 8 commented that she tried to repeat keywords from interviewee's utterances changing them into a question format to give some variation in the *aizuchi*. She aimed to use this as a confirmation of the information given by the interviewee and to show that she was indeed paying attention. This is exemplified in example (2) below,[2] which is taken from S8's interview. The topic of

the interview was the use of mobile phones by Japanese youth. S8 repeated the word *mendokusai* ('annoying/bother') in the interviewee's (coded S) utterance in turn 30, and asks *mendokusai desu ka* ('is it a bother?') in the following turn.

(2) Example of Student 8 (S8) backchanneling

30 S: *Nihon ((laugh)) nihon demo osoraku tsukawanai desu yo. Tabun sono mendokusai node ((laugh))*

'in Japan, ((laugh)) even in Japan (they/we) probably don't use it. Possibly well because (it is a) bother ((laugh))'

31 S8: *((laugh))* ***Mendokusai desu ka.***

'((laugh)) is it a bother?'

Another student who also self-assessed positively about the varieties of her *aizuchi* commented that she also repeated a part of her interviewee's utterance to confirm what the interviewee (coded Y) had said. One example is her turn 119 in example (3) below, when she repeated what her Japanese interlocutor had said in turn 118 *kodomo ga hoshii n desu yo* ('I want children'). The student commented that this use of repetition allowed her to feel that she was participating more in the conversation.

(3) Example of Student 6 (S6) backchanneling

118 Y: *Watashi sugoi kekkon shitai na tte omotte iru riyuu ga kodomo wa sugoi daisuki, kodomo ga hoshii n desu yo.*

'The reason I really want to get married is that I like children very much, I want children.'

119 S6: ***Aa kodomo hoshii n desu ne.***

'ah, you want children, I see.'

120 Y: *Um demo yappa kodomo itara kekkon shiteta hoo ga nanka shakai no nanka shisutemu ja nai desu ka.*

'um but really if I was to have children, wouldn't I have to be married to fit in more with the social system?'

121 S6: *A soo desu yo ne.*

'Ah I agree with that.'

3.2.3 Discussion

The students' comments presented above demonstrate their awareness of the role of *aizuchi* as a signal of their participation in the conversation to their interlocutor. The ability to provide wider varieties of *aizuchi* appeared to give students a positive self-evaluation of constructive participation in the conversation. The students who self-assessed to be using a limited variety of single words or set phrases such as *soo desu ne* felt that they did not succeed in developing the conversation–their interview conversation stayed as a simple 'Q & A' style interaction. These students particularly commented that they would not initiate their own turn until the interviewee

finished their turn. On the other hand, the students who observed themselves to be using a variety of backchanneling commented that they managed to repeat the interviewee's words or phrase for clarification, confirmation or as a sign of paying attention. Further, these students felt that they were also able to collaborate in conversing with the interviewee. In other words, the students who could repeat the interviewee's words or phrase as part of *aizuchi* were able to create a *kyoowa* with their interviewee. An example of such cooperation by Student 6 is given in example (4) below.

In this segment of the interview the participants are discussing the different cultural norms of praising one's own children in Australia and Japan, demonstrating different attitudes towards children. In Turn 26, Y began their shared sentence saying *demo nihon de yappa* ('but in Japan you'd expect'), then S6 takes over the conversation and continues on with that same sentence, saying *aa gyaku ni moo chotto kodomo no koto o aa moo kono ko dame desu wa toka* ('is like the opposite, when you're talking about your kids, it's more like this child is no good or'). Their shared sentence, initiated by Y in Turn 26 was then finally completed by S6 in turn 29 when she said *iimasu yo ne* ('(they) say that don't they?').

(4) Example of Student 6's (S6) discourse pattern with her interviewee, Y

24 Y: *soko made, sugoi kazoku shashin kazaru n ja nai kotchi? ato bunkateki na men de wa nanka kotoba de nanka nanka 'I'm pround of my daughter' toka soo iu kanji no hyoogen ga attari toka*

'here don't (they) display family photos to an amazing extent? also culturally, (they) have language well umm an expression like umm 'I'm proud of my daughter' and'

25 S6: *hai hai*

'yes yes'

26 Y: *demo nihon de yappa*

'but in Japan you'd expect'

27 S6: ***aa gyaku ni moo chotto kodomo no koto o aa moo kono ko dame desu wa toka***

'oh, like opposite, about your kids more like this child is no good or'

28 Y: *soo soo*

'right right'

29 S6: ***iimasu yo ne***

'(they) say don't they?'

30 Y: *soo dakara kennkyo ni natchau*

'right so (we) become humble'

As for their perceived success and awareness of any problems, a number of students reported that they did not experience any communication breakdown. The reasons

they gave for their success was that they practised the questions thoroughly before the interview. While this is a good strategy to use, some noted that as a result their interviews tended to fall into a simple question-answer interaction without developing a more natural spontaneous conversation.

Others reported on instances of problematic communication, caused by their own incorrect usage of words or pronunciation. Vocabulary appeared to be the largest factor in unsuccessful communication. The strategy they most commonly used to overcome this problem was to ask for clarification, prompting the interviewee's rephrasing.

3.3 Students' evaluation of the task

An in-class survey was conducted to examine whether students perceived the task described above as useful to their own language learning. In this survey the questions were asked in Japanese but the students were given freedom to respond in the language in which they felt more comfortable expressing their thoughts (either Japanese or English). Of the 27 students who participated in the evaluation survey, 23 students (85%) felt that they either agreed or strongly agreed with the question "Did the transcription task help you improve your Japanese?". While the student number is too low for this results to be significant, it is nonetheless important to note that the students felt it was beneficial to listen to and observe their own language use and behaviour and that the task helped their Japanese learning. Many commented that the task was useful for highlighting the areas that they needed to improve, while one student noted that "the challenge was good in enabling me to discover just how much I had understood whilst conducting the interview". Other comments from the students included the following:

> *The task had to use all the four skills.*
>
> *This assignment allowed me to hear which words I mispronounced when speaking Japanese. It also allowed me to observe? (better understand?) the interjections that a Japanese person makes during conversation, and compare them to my own.*
>
> *I noticed I don't use many particles or polite forms, which I hadn't realised before.*
>
> *I learnt different usage of words and expressions in a variety of situations.*

Another question asked in the survey was "Did analysing your own errors help you improve your Japanese?". Of the 27 who participated, 22 students (81%) answered in the affirmative, indicating that the critical analysis of their own linguistic errors helped their learning of Japanese. Many of the individual student comments indicated that these tasks "helped [them] to identify the gap between [their] level of knowledge and what [they] do not yet know". Other comments from the students included the following:

> *I found it useful to identify my strengths and weaknesses with regard to Japanese.*

I think that what was most beneficial for my Japanese was hearing my own voice and comparing my intonation to the Japanese speaker's intonation.

By analysing what was said in the interview, by the end of the task, I was able to locate my mistakes better. Also, by transcribing a native Japanese speaker, I learnt more natural and native phrases, conjunctions and aizuchi.

The process of transcribing the interview easily demonstrated my relative lack of fluency and understanding within a real-world situation, causing me to re-evaluate the amount of work I would need to do in order to improve my Japanese. Forcing me to transcribe my conversation partner's sentences also helped my sentence construction and made it more obvious what natural Japanese speech sounds like, in comparison to news, classroom contexts, etc.

There were some negative comments about this task. The most common negative comment concerned the time it took to transcribe the 10 minutes of interview. Another comment received was that one student wished that the teacher would analyse their language for them. The following comment shows that not everyone was able to 'reflect' on their language use and behaviour, and the development of better strategies to facilitate this is now part of my ongoing research.

I didn't really think that this helped me that much. It was a bit useful to think through my strategies for navigating through communication breakdowns, but ultimately I don't think that it taught me anything that the interview transcription didn't already teach me.

4. Conclusion

This study presented a task embedded in a student research project in one of the advanced Japanese language courses conducted at the ANU and student evaluation of this activity. The task required students to interview a Japanese native speaker in Japanese on various topics on social and cultural issues confronting Japan and then transcribe the interview and analyze their own language usage. This task was designed to provide students with authentic interactional opportunities with Japanese NS and to demonstrate that through analysing their own language they would improve their awareness of the gap between the target Japanese and their own current stage of Japanese.

The students' self-assessment and reflection of their language usage and their evaluation of the task indicate that a task such as this provides pedagogical values in promoting language learning in a classroom learning context. Of the 27 students who completed in the evaluation survey, more than 80% indicated that the task as a whole and the transcription and analysis of their own language use was helpful to their language learning. They indicated that they noticed their own current usage of Japanese and hence realised areas where they needed to pay attention to improve. The task incorporated the four language skills and it was an individualised task. While all students noticed where they needed to improve, one student noted that this task helped her realise just how much she could already use and understand Japanese.

With regard to student reflection on their language usage, there appears to be a relationship between the variety of *aizuchi* used and perceived success in participating in a conversation. The students who reflected that they were able to produce wider varieties of backchanneling, such as repeating the interviewee's words or phrases, rather than simply using single words and set phrases, were able to initiate their turns without waiting for the interviewee to complete their turn. This allowed them to develop *kyoowa* by forming sentences together and to control the direction of the conversation. Interestingly, those who relied on single words and set phrases to backchannel felt that they had failed to develop the conversation. Their reflections confirmed that the students saw a lack of vocabulary was the main cause of difficulty in conversing in Japanese.

The pedagogical values of this task are not limited to the promotion of student learning but also to the re-assessment of our teaching. For example, in teaching *aizuchi*, we need to be aware of the different types and functions of *aizuchi* and also that different ways of using *aizuchi* will expand a student's ability to actively participate in conversation. Rather than simply teaching words and phrases such as *hai*, *soo desu ne*, we can also train students to listen closely to the interlocutor and repeat the words or phrases uttered by them as a form of conscious backchanneling. Further, we can also train students to predict the appropriate ending of the interlocutor's unfinished utterances and not to wait till the interlocutor finishes before coming in. It can be argued that, in language teaching, it is important for the teachers to not only assess student production but to also include assessment tasks that require students to assess their own performance, thereby developing into better autonomous learners.

Notes

1. In this project we defined a turn to be when the speaker changed.
2. Note that the students' transcription submissions were only presented in Japanese; however, for the purposes of this study I have transcribed the Japanese utterances in Romanization and provided English translations.

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